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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2019

SUBJECT: ISAIAS ZEDONG?

Classified By: Ambassdor Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, who trained as a political commissar in China during the depths of the Cultural Revolution, continues to idolize Mao, remains fond of China, and governs Eritrea and its relations with the outside world based on his decades of experience as a revolutionary guerrilla leader combined with his interpretation of Maoist philosophy. END SUMMARY.

President Isaias made a surprise appearance at the Chinese Embassy's reception celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Communist takeover of China. In a rare breach of Eritrea's strictly observed protocol, Isaias interacted with the Chinese ambassador, despite not having officially received his credentials. Isaias was quickly ushered into a private dining room where he, five Chinese diplomats, and six senior Eritrean officials ate Chinese food, drank Moutai, and fondly discussed Sino-Eritrean relations. Romedan Mohamed Nur, who trained in China with Isaias in the mid-1960s, was present but largely ignored by the Eritrean president. Chinese Ambassador Li Liansheng later provided a detailed read-out to

the ambassador. President Isaias mentioned ten times during the course of the evening his "42-year long relationship with China," dating from his 1967 training as a political commissar during Mao's Cultural Revolution.

13. (C) PASS THE MOUTAI AND KEEP IT COMING

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Isaias ate little during the meal but drank almost a whole bottle of high-proof Moutai, becoming visibly inebriated and sentimental as the evening drew on. He remarked repeatedly on his admiration of Chairman Mao and claimed that Mao laid the foundation for all of China's subsequent achievements. Other Chinese diplomats tell us Isaias dislikes Deng Xiaoping because Deng attempted to undermine Mao's legacy. Isaias avidly consumes biographies of Mao and has refused offers of books on Deng and modern China. On a monthly basis the Chinese ambassador's chef gets a request from Isaias to send over a Chinese meal. Ambassador Li reported that Isaias watches Chinese news on television. Now 63 years old, President Isaias still plays a mean game of ping pong, according to some observers, when his chronic lower back pain permits.

14. (C) WHAT WOULD MAO DO?

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While Isaias is not known to wear a bracelet embroidered with WWMD?, he clearly reveres the revolutionary guerrilla leader-cum-ruling strongman. A young man of humble origins who through ruthless determination rose to the top of a revolutionary army and defeated a stronger foe, led his country against foreign domination, and launched a wrenching social revolution, Isaias probably sees many parallels between his life and Mao's. Isaias' closure of Eritrea's only university mirrors Mao's anti-intelligentsia campaigns of the mid-1960s. His nationalization of the economy and the wholesale conscription of Eritrean youth into a "national service" of military duty and forced labor resemble some aspects of Mao's early rule. Isaias eschews a blatant cult of personality (unlike his hero), but brooks no opposition and entertains no notions of pluralism--at least for the next four decades. While Mao's China fought India, sent "volunteers" to Korea, and tangled with the Soviet Union over their border, Isaias has fought Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Yemen to establish his bonafides as a regional power. Ambassador Li wryly commented that Isaias idolizes his relationship with China, "perhaps because we are so far away."

15. (C) COMMENT: The influence of Maoist China on Isaias should not be overdrawn, but it is there, perhaps most importantly as a philosophical lodestone for Eritrea's isolated and mercurial dictator. Despite China's evolution beyond Maoist politics and economics, Isaias remains fond of the PRC. Today China provides about \$12m of "no questions asked" assistance, is a source of easy-term military purchases, has invested in Eritrea's promising mining sector, and provides political top-cover in multilateral fora. While Chinese today allow that Mao "was 70 percent correct," Isaias seems to have adopted many of his policies from the other 30 percent. End Comment.

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